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Deal To Fix Pollution System Keeps Phosphate Plant Open

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OPERATORS, COUNTY AGREE ON COMPLIANCE DEADLINE

PLANT CITY - One of Hillsborough County's oldest phosphate processing plants is avoiding a possible shutdown over air pollution violations with a promise to modernize the aging facility.

Coronet Industries, founded about a century ago, signed a settlement agreement Wednesday with the county Environmental Protection Commission agreeing to a third-party audit and to make repairs or changes the audit recommends.

The plant, 4082 Coronet Road southeast of the city limits, faced a possible closure by government regulators.

"We've made it pretty clear to them, we were at a point of considering taking drastic measures," said Sterlin Woodard, assistant director of the EPC's air management division.

"We're not in the business of shutting businesses down, but we were looking at the possibility of how to shut [Coronet] down."

The process Coronet uses to produce animal food supplements causes dust particles and a noxious gas, the combination of which can kill plant life and rust metal if released into the atmosphere untreated. The plant isn't releasing the gas and dust in high enough concentrations to be harmful to humans, the EPC said.

The plant, with a work force of about 130, has a lengthy history of emissions violations, and EPC officials say they've had enough. They want a full accounting of what Coronet needs to fix to meet air emissions requirements.

Coronet is one of the worst radioactive poluters in FL. , I intervied in the neighborhood , most were poor spanish people, I will never forget this poor man saying "Many people die here and everyone knows it's them and he pointed to the factory , I asked him what did they die of?" He replied "Brain Cancer" The EPA gave them



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Plant owners have 180 days from signing the settlement agreement to complete the audit and submit a final report on all work that needs to be done. They must also submit a time line for completing the repairs to avoid a possible closure.

an extension until their permit expires. Three more years to poison innocent people with illegal radioactive emissions , Typical Florida policy to poison the public and protect the polluter.

EPC attorney Richard Tschantz said Coronet has until May 2005 to get its pollution control system in proper working order or face EPC enforcement action. That is the same year the company's operating permit runs out.

Coronet Environmental Manager Jim Baker said the company is committed to doing what is necessary to correct the problems.

While Baker contends the emissions violations have not been intentional, he concedes they have been ongoing.

Coronet hired Baker, a licensed engineer, in January to focus mainly on the settlement agreement, he said.

"The decision was made to go forward with the audit and come up with a plan to prioritize how to fix this, that and the other," Baker said. "To be honest, at this point, we don't know what the cost will be."

Plant Tries To Modernize

Coronet, built in 1903, is owned by Onoda Chemical Industry Co. and Mitsui, both Japanese companies. It produces an animal feed supplement called tricalcium phosphate, or Coronet Defluorinated Phosphate. The supplement is shipped mostly to chicken farms across the United States.

The granulated supplements are derived from phosphate rock, which Mitsui USA provides to Coronet.

Over the years, while the plant has upgraded some of its equipment, it has had myriad problems with its pollution controls, regularly violating federal air pollution laws, Woodard said. The problems have been uncovered during inspections of the plant.

If Coronet's owners don't live up to their part of the settlement agreement, the EPC could still shut the plant down.

"They've tried to modernize over the years, but the bottom line is it is a very old facility and they've had a

lot of problems with emissions and dust," Woodard said.

Dust is created as the supplements are made, Woodard said.

And removing fluoride from the phosphate rock creates hydrofluoric gas. Woodard likened the gas to a mild acid.

A portion of the dust and gas escapes the plant as "fugitive emissions," meaning they don't go through the proper cleaning process before being released into the environment.

"It's not like we're talking about a huge plume of sulfuric acid going into the atmosphere," he said. "But there is certainly a portion of their emissions that aren't getting captured" and cleaned.

Following the state's guidelines to find ways to reduce industrial waste, Coronet has, over the years, found ways to capture much of the fluoride it removes from the phosphate and reuse it in manufacturing, Baker said. But the dust and gas is still released into the atmosphere, either cleaned or otherwise.

Over the years, Coronet has corrected problems as they've surfaced through EPC inspections, but another problem inevitably crops up, said Kay Strother, chief of the EPC's enforcement and analysis section.

Hopefully, she said, the audit and subsequent fixes will bring the plant into full compliance. "We hope it will be a good model to use in places where we just can't seem to get compliance."

Deciding The Fine Print

"We've been around and around with them for a long time, but we're there now," said EPC attorney Tschantz.

A file at his office in Tampa shows the two sides have gone back and forth for months on deciding the fine print in the settlement agreement.

"The real holdup, according to meetings with them, is the cost of the controls to prevent the [fugitive] air emissions," Tschantz said.

The company has agreed to spend \$50,000 a year to fix its old and poorly maintained equipment, Tschantz said. And if that won't get the job done by 2005, the company must come back to the EPC to negotiate

another deadline and annual expenditure for repairs.

"They didn't want to agree themselves into bankruptcy," Tschantz said. "So we agreed to let them do \$50,000 a year, at this point.

"If the audit uncovers substantially more cost, we will come back to the table."

And if the audit uncovers something considered an imminent public health threat, it must be fixed immediately, Tschantz added.

Baker said the company has received proposals from three environmental firms that want to do the audit and he hopes to get it under way quickly. EPC officials will sign off on the environmental firm and the scope of work.

"Our concern right now is, will it cost us \$10 or \$10 million?" Baker said. "We have to budget all of it and right now, we just don't know."

CORONET HISTORY

1903: Mining engineer C.G. Memminger and real estate broker E.C. Stuart establish Coronet Phosphate Co. after discovering phosphate deposits in eastern Hillsborough County. The phosphate plant and Coronet Village, housing for employees, are built.

1940: Coronet begins production of chicken and livestock food supplements.

1946: A phosphate defluorinating plant is constructed.

1952: Coronet is purchased by the Smith-Douglass Co. and both companies are purchased by The Borden Co. in 1964. Amax Chemical Co. subsequently takes over Coronet in 1980.

1986: A division of Florida Crushed Stone, Consolidated Minerals Inc., takes ownership of Coronet.

1993: Consolidated Minerals Inc. is purchased by Mitsui & Co. Ltd. of Tokyo and Onoda Chemical Industry Co., a subsidiary of Onoda Cement Co. Of Yamaguchi, Japan. The business operates as Coronet

Industries Inc.



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